

Dueling Environmentalists: NDEP, UNR professor at odds over mercury study

By [DOUG McMURDO](#) - Associate Editor

ELKO — One month after lawmakers in Carson City heard a damning report regarding mercury emissions at Nevada mines, representatives of the state's environmental protection agency essentially dismissed the study as amateurish and wholly without merit.

Glenn Miller, the University of Nevada, Reno professor who supervised the study has defended the report. Miller, who also is the treasurer of the watchdog group Great Basin Mine Watch, told the Free Press he is a supporter of mining in Nevada and only seeks to ensure mercury emissions are monitored as thoroughly as possible.

Leo Drozdoff and Colleen Cripps of the Nevada Division of Environmental Protection, however, virtually accused Miller of deliberately misleading lawmakers. The pair cited several serious flaws they allege are present in Miller's report in a letter they wrote to the professor, who works at UNR's Center for Environmental Sciences & Engineering.

Drozdoff and Cripps said they found many flaws, including a "complete lack of methodology, significant variability in the presentation of the data, no consistency in data interpretation, no quality assurance, data that appear to have been reported selectively and no statistical analysis to support claims of significance."

The state environmentalists also noted Miller's study was not subjected to peer review — a requirement in any legitimate research effort — and that inflammatory comments made to lawmakers last month were not supported by the results.

Miller did not take NDEP's comments in stride and responded in a report obtained by the Free Press late this week. Miller said the state's response was "very aggressive" and did not recognize the conclusions. He did, however, say his findings would be revised in coming weeks to include more background information.

But officials with NDEP don't believe the study is worth basing any conclusions on, and indicated bringing the report to the Legislature was premature and even political grandstanding. A copy of the report was leaked to a Las Vegas Sun reporter. The Sun in the past has published questionable articles critical of northern Nevada's mining industry.

"It is highly unlikely this study, in its current form, would survive a peer review, yet without any review and despite significant flaws in the work and the conclusions that stem from it," said Drozdoff, "this information has been presented to the public as fact."

Miller said Drozdoff focused on “the small details” and did not question data that indicated high mercury readings. The professor accused NDEP of being defensive and suggested his only motive was to ensure a meaningful mercury monitoring program was implemented.

While Miller’s report to the Legislature indicated there were dangerously high levels of mercury near Nevada mines — endangering mine workers and surrounding communities — in his response to NDEP he said the study was limited to testing an instrument used in the study to see if it could measure elemental mercury in air. In other words, the study was to obtain a “snapshot” of mercury concentrations upwind and downwind from mines, but was not comprehensive.

But in a story from The Associated Press published in the Feb. 17 [Elko Daily Free Press](#), Miller told lawmakers mercury levels near mines were “thousands of times” higher than background levels and claimed inhalation was an issue.

In the end, a bill authored by Assemblywoman Sheila Leslie, D-Reno, would require NDEP to protect workers at mines where mercury is an issue, and to reduce emissions by one quarter over the next five years. A voluntary program implemented by mines in 2000 reduced emissions by as much as 80 percent.

Because Nevada is in a mercury belt — where there is mercury there is generally gold — it could prove very difficult to establish the source. Also, while the U.S. has aggressively sought to limit the release of mercury and other pollutants into the atmosphere, emerging industries in China, India and other rapidly developing countries emit hundreds of tons of mercury each year, which enters the jet stream and circles the globe.

Worldwide emissions of mercury have been pegged at 6,000 tons per year. NDEP pegs the U.S. share at 124 tons, and Nevada mines at 2 tons — down from 10 tons seven years ago.

NDEP is already involved with two mercury-related research projects — in conjunction with UNR — and in the letter to Miller they noted the university researchers are professional and strictly adhere to “widely accepted scientific protocols.”

From Miller’s perspective, all parties should agree the state is in need of a more comprehensive monitoring system than currently exists. Drozdoff agrees, providing the studies that lead to such a system are valid and apolitical.